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Baroque Visual Rhetoric. Vernon Hyde Minor.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. xii + 272 pp. \$85.

When announcing a new book, most publishers give an indication of the target audience. The University of Toronto Press, however, does not do so in their announcement of Vernon Hyde Minor's *Baroque Visual Rhetoric*. That is unfortunate, as I find it hard to guess which readership the author had in mind. His earlier *Art History's History* was acclaimed for its "jargon-free, reader-friendly language," but that praise is certainly not applicable to this book. If Minor aimed at (beginning or even advanced) students or generally interested readers, I am afraid he has overestimated them. Even as a professional art historian I found it difficult and at times impossible to penetrate the dense forest of jargon and grasp the added value or contribution of the continuing reappearance of names of such philosophers as Kant, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida. Assuming that the author is addressing colleagues in his own field does not create more clarity. Minor on and off styles himself "an art historian" (117, 186, 198), a "modern art historian" (173) (does that mean a historian of modern art or a modern historian of art, whatever that may be?), an "art-historical critic" (5, 162), a "historical critic" (179), and a "professional critic" (90).

The fact that the author amply lards his text with Heidegger, Derrida, and similar thinkers indicates that his book is not a "traditional" art historical study. Obviously, Minor's aim was not to analyze Baroque visual rhetoric according to the intentions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century artists or according to the standards of that age. Nor did he write an orderly study of the reception of Baroque art and/or its visual rhetoric in later centuries. On page 3 he explains that the essays in his book "in no way claim individually or aggregately to be a systematic treatment of what I am calling 'baroque visual rhetoric.'" Instead, he wants to subject "those historical objects traditionally considered by art historians" to "modern critical theory" (6). Considering art works from

his own unique point of view, Minor invokes “critical perspectives as I see how they might fit. I hope but cannot be assured that readers will find something of value in my self-assays (as Harold Bloom translates the French *essais*)” (3).

I am afraid that in my case Minor’s hope did not come true. With due respect for his personal observations and the thick layers of literary-critical idiom he wraps them in, I find it hard to see how they add to my understanding of the artworks under discussion. Some of these reflections reach a Donald Rumsfeld–like dimension, such as the comment in the discussion of Filippo della Valla’s Tomb of Innocent XII in St. Peter’s (Rome) that blindness “is a way of understanding what we do not understand about the artwork” (53–54). Other observations are based on very personal impressions, for instance that Agostino Cornacchi’s statue of *Prudence* in the Corsini chapel in St. John Lateran (Rome) “looks for all the world like a mannequin in a store window. . . . She has the self-admiring, smug appearance of one who hardly needs to look into the mirror to confirm what she already knows about herself: she is a beauty” (205). I do not know what to make of the conclusion that “Bernini’s achievement is not one of gratuitous stylishness; his shaping of patterns to achieve identification between angel as statue and angel as idea is metaphorical, and by its very nature the metaphor is transcendent and destroys any possibility of an autotelic moment” (138). Moreover, I am sorry to say that the author is not always very fortunate in his phrasing: “Livio Pestilli demonstrates that, despite a certain disdain for Bernini after his death, he was neither forgotten nor utterly repudiated” (61).

Minor discusses mainly artworks in Rome, along with a few, supposedly Jansenist, paintings of Philippe de Champaigne. Readers attracted by the title of the book and expecting a systematic analysis of the visual rhetoric of these works, within a proper historical context, will be disappointed. Minor’s discussions tell little about the artworks themselves; they mainly reveal how the author looks at them through dense layers of critical jargon. For some this may be an eye-opener, but for me it mostly hampers my vision.

Jan L. de Jong, *University of Groningen*